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ABSTRACT

A survey of Oregon school administrators explored the relationships among demographic characteristics, school building and school district constraints, and leadership impact. Methodology involved a mailed survey of 420 administrators, which yielded 319 responses, or a 70 percent response rate, and in-depth personal interviews with 144 respondents. Findings indicated a similarity of opinions shared among school administrators across different situations and identified the emergence of an occupational culture that stresses leadership. When other factors were controlled, district constraints and leadership impact were found to be inversely related. Superintendents, however, reported fewer feelings of constraint and more belief in their administrative impact than other administrators. A recommendation is made for further research on superintendents to integrate the study of traits and contingencies into school leadership theory. Three statistical tables are included. (27 references) (LMI)

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SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS' LEADERSHIP IMPACT: A VIEW FROM THE FIELD

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Abstract

A questionnaire-and-interview survey of Oregon school administrators explored the relationship between demographic characteristics, school building and school district constraints, and leadership impact. Findings indicated that school administrators across situations had very similar opinions and that an occupational culture stressing leadership was emerging. For individuals, constraints and leadership impact were inversely related with other factors controlled. However, superintendents felt less constrained and believed they made more impact than other administrators.

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Introduction

In **Leaders for America's Schools**, The National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration (1988) called for a re-examination and transformation of school administrator preparation, echoing calls for reform in other educational arenas. The report raises, but does not answer, the dilemmas of training administrators who can and will be **both** leaders and managers. The Commission's report is rhetorical and prescriptive, representing the judgments of the field's elite rather than the experience of practitioners in the field. In fact, it brings in little data or interpretation about what school administrators actually do (Schon, 1983), what impact they actually may have on schools and districts (Mowday, 1978), and what internal and external forces may constrain their activities. In this research we report data from a survey-and-interview study conducted in Oregon, discussing the demographic, positional, and situational correlates of leadership impact in schools.

Theoretical Framework

Leadership theory and research are growth industries in the organizational sciences, in education, and, increasingly,

in the popular press. Three types of theories predominate in the literature: first, contingency approaches (Fiedler, 1967; Blake and Mouton, 1978) that focus on relationships between leadership styles and situational context; second, "frame" approaches (Bolman & Deal, 1984; Hersey and Blanchard, 1982) that argue that individual leaders can and should change their emphasis to fit specific circumstances; and third, "transformational" leadership approaches (Burns, 1978) which derives largely from Weber's concept of charisma and is reflected in such educational writing as Lightfoot's (1984) **The Good High School** and Blumberg and Greenfield's (1985) **The Effective Principal**. Contingency theory, by contrast, contains built-in assumptions that organizational contexts and environments may vary greatly, and its major contribution has been the attempt to relate choices and outcomes to environmental variance (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). However, as Hanson's (1985) review of the literature suggests, contingency theory approaches have been rare in research on educational organizations.

In this research we have identified potential contexts and constraints that may enhance or inhibit leader effectiveness. We were particularly interested in learning whether there was a measurable "fit" between people, situations, and outcomes, at least as administrators experienced and reported them. Demographic factors--age, gender, experience, position--constituted one set of variables; support structures and constraints at building and

district levels another; and district finances (in a state without school finance reform and where substantial inequities between districts are common) a third. Following the theoretical logic of contingency theory we anticipated that circumstances, largely uncontrollable in most situations, would have more powerful effects on leadership impact than demographic variables.

In elaborating these issues, we operationalized three variables that capture significant elements of contingency theory. The first is "district constraints." Organizational theory generally and contingency theory specifically emphasize the extent to which external environments set limits on executive action. Although K-12 school districts are relatively similar to one another--more similar than they are say to paper mills, silicon chip manufacturers, or insurance companies--they differ substantially in three areas: resources, demographic composition of the student body, and size. Findings reported by Daft and Becker (1980), Meyer, et al. (1988), and, in higher education, Cameron, et al. (1987) indicate that these contextual differences affect some aspects of both organizational structure and organizational performance.

"Building constraints," a second concept, is narrower and more "personal." Schools, even those of similar size and demographic composition within the same district, differ in outlook and performance. Explanations are not always clear. Halpin (1966) suggested that "organizational climate," which

combined leader' behavior patterns and followers' attitudes constituted a key difference. More recently, in parallel to behavioral scientists' research on corporations, Brookover, et al. (1979), Metz (1986), and Rutter, et al. (1979, have focused on "organizational culture," and have sought to uncover patterns of both norms and habitual behavior that differentiate between individual schools. Researchers and reformers have made the case that these norms and behaviors are the source of school "excellence" and school "effectiveness" (Austin & Garber, 1985).

A third core concept is "leadership impact," the extent to which school leaders actually have an effect on their organizations. Significantly, current rhetoric expects no less: school administrators are encouraged to exercise leadership rather than merely to "manage" their domains (Griffiths, et al., 1987). Their influence may be felt in any or all of the following: staff and student morale, educational policy, and measureable outcomes. Behaviors aside, the activist view of educational leadership seems comfortable for school administrators as we reported in a previous paper (Goldman & Kempner, 1988).

Methods and Data Source

The research combined survey and interview methods. Working with the state's Leadership Academy, a program funded jointly by the U.S. Department of Education's "Project Lead" and the school administrators' association, we conducted this research both to provide baseline data on the state's

administrators and to address the issues discussed above. Sampling from the 2,500 association members, we mailed eight-page self-administered questionnaires to 420 administrators, stratifying our sample by region, district size, gender, and administrative position. Questionnaires contained five sections: biographic data, individual job characteristics, professional development, district problems, and barriers to administrative effectiveness. Individual items used in previous national surveys of school superintendents (Knezevich, 1971) and principals (McCleary and Thomson, 1979) were edited to reflect state characteristics and current issues of national concern. After two follow-up mailings, we received a total of 319 (70 percent) returned questionnaires; responding administrators proportionately reflected our sampling strata. We then interviewed 144 respondents. The one-and-a-half to two hour interview consisted largely of a reflective job history and asked administrators to detail major influences in their careers, to identify key skills and where and how they did or did not acquire them, and to evaluate past and present administrative training programs.

I N S E R T T A B L E 1 A B O U T H E R E

The completed sample represented a cross-section of Oregon administrators, with roughly accurate proportions of individuals from different size districts and in different administrative positions. The first two columns of Table 1 provide an abbreviated demographic portrait of the sample population. Oregon is typical of those small and medium-size

states with agricultural and natural resource-based economies with geographic, economic, political and values splits between its major metropolis and the small cities and rural areas elsewhere. Funding of K-2 education has been relatively generous but, owing to heavy dependence (50 percent) on local property taxes and little statewide equalization, quite uneven with obviously "rich" and "poor" districts scattered throughout the state. There has never been major school finance reform, and until 1987-88 districts could, and did, close when local voters repeatedly turn down operating levies. The 1987 "safety net" legislation kept schools open, but at frozen levels of basic support. Financial issues are a persistent worry for Oregon administrators, not only because funding levels are inadequate for many districts and there are glaring between-district inequities, but because of year-to-year uncertainty. Administrators must guess what property tax levels their public will accept, and then campaign for annual operating levies in referendum elections.

Findings and Discussion

The findings raise three issues: (1) the statistical integrity of our concepts; (2) the question of sample variance, or lack of it, which may suggest an emergent ideology of educational administration; and (3) data bearing on the theoretical question of "traits versus contingencies" in understanding leadership.

First, the concepts. We employed a factor analysis (reported in Table 2) to test specific questionnaire items

against the three concepts of district constraints, building constraints, and leadership impact. Results suggest that there are clear-cut distinctions between the three concept an each has a degree of statistical as well as conceptual integrity. Factor loadings far exceed the somewhat liberal .40 level suggested by Bailey (1987: 356), yet both they and the individual intercorrelations are not so high that items duplicate one another.

I N S E R T T A B L E 2 A B O U T H E R E

Interview data seemed to reinforce the conceptual face validity. For instance, typical district constraints included such factors as "collective bargaining policies, contracts, and activities [that] are confrontational in nature and promote discord" and "the fact that time is allowed for all to express themselves; communicating views is very time consuming . . .At times it seemed to take forever to reach decisions." Adminstrators frequently mentioned the issue of flexibility both positively ("freedom to manage the school as [I] believe right-flexibility") and negatively ("no freedom or latitude left to teachers the the principal--everything dictated, no flexibility").

Examples of building constraints from the interviews include such comments as "politics--no one told me how hard it was to work with peple who had so many different philosophies" and "the lack of sensitivity of some staff people that work with kids." Resistance to change, "especially by older

teachers" was mentioned frequently in interviews as were communication and conflict.

Leadership impact deals with the influence administrators have on teacher performance and student success. In fact, the language of "having an impact" and "making a difference" comes up frequently in interviews both as a general statement and with specific referents to affecting children and fellow staff members. Adminstrators do not see themselves as bureaucratic caretakers; they want to be perceived as leaders who actually do something. Leadership impact is similar to the term "sense of efficacy" discussed by Squire (1988) and others. Note, however, that measures of the concept are one dimensional and from the top down: administrators are asked about the influence they think they have. Subordinates are not asked whether this influence actually exists.

While the factor analysis reinforces the view that these questionnaire items effectively distinguish between concepts, it is less clear that they distinguish well between categories of people. However, items in these scales and the scales themselves had less variance than one frequently sees in survey research about organizationally-related attitudes. Moreover, as the one-way analysis of variances presented in the last three columns of Table 1 indicate, neither demographic differences, including gender, nor district characteristics appear to explain the variance that did exist in leadership impact. The exceptions we explore later.

Why would women and men (gender differences disappear when position is held constant), older and younger administrators, those in large and small or rich and poor districts, principals and central office administrators seem so similar? One explanation emphasizes the context of the state as an environment for school administration. Oregon is unusually homogeneous in its demography: Afro-Americans and Hispanics together constitute only 4 percent of the state's population and Asians an additional 4 percent. The white population is largely northern European in origin and there are only a very few small sub-communities which contain first generation immigrants speaking European languages. Recent in-migration reflects the resident population. The state's homogeneity also reduces the impact of cultural factors on education, both in ethnic and racial conflicts that spill directly over into the schools, and indirectly in curriculum issues and in the need to integrate large numbers of non-English-speaking students. This generalization is least true in the Portland area and is changing, albeit slowly, elsewhere in the state as well.

Also encouraging similarities in administrator attitudes is Oregon's tightly controlled administrative certification process, regulated by an active, bureaucratically-oriented standards and practices commission. The state requires a specific series of courses for each of four progressive levels of administrative certification. Programs are accredited only in two state universities and one private college. The three

programs share similar instructional philosophies and there is substantial interaction and programmatic collaboration between faculties at the three institutions. Hence, most administrators have been exposed to roughly parallel, and national standards, comparatively rigorous, programs. These programs, in addition to requiring "nuts and bolts" courses, emphasize policy, leadership, communication, and organizational behavior in a manner that reflects the reform rhetoric of the Report of the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration (Griffiths, et al., 1988). Moreover, the state's Leadership Academy developed by the administrators' professional association stresses the same knowledge and skills areas, and philosophical orientation. Because this study relied entirely on self-report data, the factor of social desireability could have strongly influenced the findings. Results show about how administrators behave and believe, and more about what they think they are supposed to believe about school administration and their own contributions generally and about their schools and districts specifically.

A second explanation is national. It partially extends the Oregon interpretation to a national scope, and raises the issue of "school administrator ideology" to which we alluded in the section introduction. With the attention given the reform agenda and the fundamental similarities between school administration virtually everywhere, there may be an emerging ideology of school administration. Recent writings, whether

research reports or hortatory recommendations, increasingly use such terms as "excellence," "effectiveness," and "vision," strongly conveying the impression that administrators must lead rather than merely manage. Interview data from the Lead study indicate that most administrators do in fact stress a positive attitude, value adaptability and experience, and believe human relations and communications skills are the essential tools of administration. They perceive the job in its human as well as in its technical dimensions. This may be one reason why most believe administrative training, which emphasizes classroom rather than on-the-job learning, ideas rather than skills, to be deficient. What these findings suggest is that what Van Maanen and Barley (1984) call an "occupational culture" may have begun to develop in school administration. Increasing self-conscious, progressively standardized training programs--or at least beliefs about ideal training programs, more visible national and state professional associations have stimulated the emergence of a collective identity. Both the visibility, sometimes negative, of schools generally that has resulted from the Reform Agenda, and the formal separation between teachers and school administrators that resulted from collective bargaining may also have heightened administrators' professional awareness.

One finding, however, was statistically and conceptually significant. Superintendents differed from other administrators both in their sense of the constraints they faced and in their leadership impact. Superintendents had a

far greater sense of empowerment and agency than other administrators, even principals, even when age and tenure--usually correlated with the superintendency--were controlled statistically. The language of the superintendent interviews includes such comments as I have an ability to work with school board members in setting district goals . . . and the overall management of the curriculum program" and "I have established an organizational plan under which . . . I delegate . . . and then . . . facilitate my colleagues to do their job."

That superintendents are different is neither original nor startling. Nevertheless, it has not been frequently reported, probably because most previous surveys of school administrators have been position-specific and do not allow comparison between different administrative positions, for instance principals versus superintendents. We can speculate about the reasons for these differences. Likely explanatory factors include the effects of being at an organizational apex with no direct superiors, the insulation from many of the day-to-day crises plaguing principals, and perhaps those personality traits that lead to selection. As with administators in general, tenure in the superintendency appears to have little effect on attitudes, at least suggesting the possibility that some selection factors may be operating. To some degree this finding hints that further research addressed to the issue of traits may prove fruitful, even though most published research indicates substantial

variation even among holders of the same position (Blumberg, 1985).

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

The multiple regression equations presented in Table 3 allow us to explore these implications a bit further. Regressions on district and building constraints are uneventful. The negative relationship between the district constraints and the superintendency is not surprising; it reproduces the one-way findings presented above. Moreover, it reminds us of the extent to which superintendents may perceive themselves as personifying the district: constraints reflect directly on their leadership. Similarly, for other administrators, they may <u>be</u> the constraint. The positive relationship between size and district constraints probably depicts the extent to which organizational size always has organizational consequences (Perrow, 1986). Larger organizations, unless decentralized, are generally less flexible, and hence more constraining.

The regression on leadership impact is much more interesting. It indicates that, with individual characteristics controlled statistically, building, and especially district constraints adversely affect administrators' beliefs that they can have an impact on their schools. If their view is accurate, this has significant implications for school organization and for leadership theory in educational settings. It is not surprising that district constraints have the stronger effect. Greater power resides

in central offices, and administrators may feel its limits more deeply. Moreover, district-wide constraints are often external and therefore less controllable, especially by building-level administrators. Overcoming building constraints--problems of poor communication, resistance to change, and the like--is considered the key to administrative leadership in schools, and their continued adverse effects are often considered a sign of ineffectiveness.

Nevertheless, taken at face value, this table suggests that the contingency approach to school leadership may have some intellectual and practical utility. Some school or district characteristics may "fit" more or less well with specific individual administrators. Negative fits, even if these are perceived rather than "real," may reduce administrative performance. The reverse may also be true. If characteristics provide a fit, these should reflect position descriptions. While contingencies seem difficult to specify in education because schools and districts are more like one another than different, these possibilities should not be ruled out as a way to integrate trait and contingency theories of leadership.

A caveat: This finding is suggestive only. Self-reports about both constraints and impacts are only one element of those complex realities. Administrators within a single district do not see constraints in exactly the same way. Constraints may become an excuse for not having an impact. Conversely, minimizing reported constraints may be a sign of

false modesty or simply of the positive thinking that we suggested above seems to characterize the school administrator's ideology and world view.

Conclusions

District and school building constraints and leadership impact appear to be theoretically definable concepts amenable to measurement in a sample of school administrators. They are clearly distinct from one another statistically, yet the two do correlate positively. Specifically, when other factors are controlled, district constraints reduce leadership impact. However, only one other finding consistently appeared in these survey data: superintendents felt less constrained and believed they had more leadership influence than other administrators. This finding was interesting because both the survey statistics, and especially the data from semi-structured interviews, indicated, as we noted above, substantial similarity of views among school administrators regardless of their situations and individual demographic characteristics. An occupational culture, along with a public ideology of leadership and personal efficacy, characterize the sample. At the same time, it is difficult to determine whether superintendents, seemingly a bit different, are ideal-typic of the administrative "breed" or whether they have specific characteristics that do set them apart. If the latter, we need to explore if these are selection criteria operating in a systematic fashion or if they are attributes that result from tenure and experience. If the occupational

culture argument is correct, we would probably expect to find more differences than we did between new and veteran administrators; the latter would have ready answers while the former are just learning the questions. Further research in this area might elaborate how traits and contingencies might be integrated into a clearer theory of school leadership.

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TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AND SUB-GROUP MEANS

	N	Sample Percentage	School Building Constraints (Means)	District Constraints (Means)	Leadership Impact (Means)
				***	***
POSITION					
Superintendent	36	11.3 %	2.07	1.52	4.38
Central Office Staff	75	23.5	2.27	2.42	3.71
Principal	155	48.6	2.10	2.39	3.79
Vice-Principal	53	16.6	2.15	2.40	3.67
			**	**	**
GENDER					
Male	232	72.7 %	2.08	2.20	3.91
Female	87	27.3	2.34	2.54	3.61
AGE					
Under 30	4	1.3 %	2.00	2.70	3.96
30-39	57	17.9	2.22	2.42	3.80
40-49	147	46.1	2.18	2.32	3.80
50-65	111	34.8	2.07	2.20	3.85
ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE					
Less than 3 years	49	15.4 %	2.15	2.32	3.73
3-9 years	85	26.6	2.28	2.46	3.73
10-15 years	84	26.3	2.10	2.28	3.79
16-20 years	41	12.9	2.06	2.10	4.11
over 20 years	50	15.7	2.08	2.30	3.84
				**	
DISTRICT SIZE					
Less than 200 students	9	2.8 %	2.00	1.44	4.18
200 - 999 students	42	13.0	2.07	2.04	3.89
1,000 - 4,999 students	103	32.6	2.15	2.28	3.89
5,000 - 9,999 students	85	26.9	2.06	2.42	3.74
Over 10,000 students	77	24.7	2.28	2.43	3.79
			**		
DISTRICT PER PUPIL COST					
Less than $3,000	31	9.8 %	1.85	2.20	3.87
$3,000 - $3,999	234	74.3	2.16	2.33	3.78
More than $4,000	50	15.9	2.37	2.21	3.96
OREGON SAFETY NET					
Yes	43	13.6 %	2.08	2.40	3.89
No	273	86.4	2.17	2.28	3.80
MEAN			2.15	2.31	3.82

*p (F-test) < .05
**p (F-test) < .01
***p (F-test) < .001

TABLE 2: FACTOR ANALYSIS FOR LEADERSHIP IMPACT, DISTICT & BUILDING CONSTRAINTS

	FACTOR #1	FACTOR #2	FACTOR#3
LEADERSHIP IMPACT			
Influence on decisions	0.79	-0.21	-0.07
Demonstrate leadership ability	0.77	-0.05	-0.16
Job autonomy	0.70	-0.18	-0.05
Can make a difference	0.75	-0.02	-0.22
Influence on district policy	0.66	-0.27	0.03
Support from superiors	0.63	-0.47	0.01
DISTRICT-WIDE CONSTRAINTS			
Superiors not performing to expectations	-0.12	0.82	0.04
Lack of flexibility	-0.29	0.78	-0.02
Poor communication between administrators	-0.17	0.71	0.10
Resistance to new ideas in district	-0.23	0.75	0.09
School board not performing to expectations	-0.03	0.65	0.01
SCHOOL-BUILDING CONSTRAINTS			
Friction among teachers	-0.10	-0.12	0.74
Friction between teachers & administrators	-0.17	0.01	0.79
Teachers not performing to expectations	-0.03	0.04	0.64
Resistance to new ideas in building	-0.03	0.20	0.70
Poor teacher-administrator communication	-0.05	0.06	0.75

TABLE 3: MULTIPLE REGRESSIONS ON DISTRICT & BUILDING CONSTRAINTS AND LEADERSHIP IMPACT

	District Constraints			Building Constraints			Leadership Impact		
Independent Variables	r	beta	partitioned R2	r	beta	partitioned R2	r	beta	partitioned R2
Superintendent (dummy)	-0.30	-0.25 ***		-0.04	0.01		0.28	0.12 *	
"Male" (dummy)	-0.17	-0.11		-0.16	-0.12		0.18	0.06	
Experience	-0.06	0		-0.08	0.01		0.10	0.05	
Tenure in position	0.06	0.09		-0.13	-0.12		-0.06	-0.10	
District size	0.18	0.17 **		0.06	-0.03		-0.10	0.01	
Annual $ per student	-0.01	-0.02		0.18	0.18 **		0.04	0.06	
Oregon Safety Net (dummy)	-0.05	-0.07		0.05	0.01		-0.04	-0.06	
District constraints		--		0.13	0.12 *		-0.47	-0.39 ***	
Building constraints		--			--		-0.20	-0.16 **	
Multiple R2		0.14 ***			0.09 **			0.28 ***	
F Value									